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PRIVILEGE

CONNECTIONS

QUARTERLY

Privileged and Marginalized

by Rosetta Lee

Teaching Privilege

by Drew Johnson and Jeff Turner

Teaching Privilege that is Mindful
of Identity Development

by Amy Argenal

Gender and Privilege

by Susanna Jones

Literature in Review

by Richard Barbieri

Understanding and Confronting
White Privilege in Schools:

A Journey of Cultural Humility

by Charlotte Worsley

Parent and Teacher Tips

by Julie Stevens and
Martin Stegemoeller

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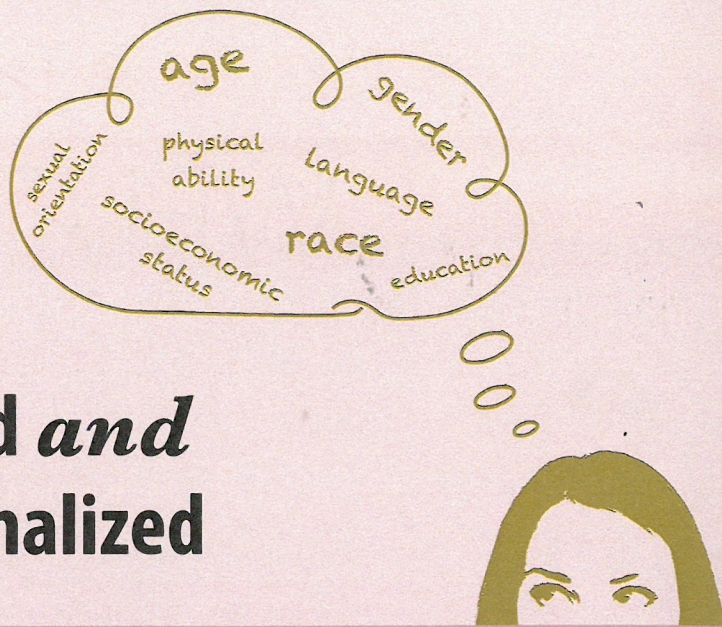
Privileged and Marginalized

By Rosetta Lee

Seattle Girls' School, Seattle, WA

I am sitting in the Emergency Room with my parents. My father has a terrible rash, and his primary care doctor has advised him to go to the emergency room to get a course of antibiotics as soon as possible. My mother is also here, as she is the primary caretaker for my father. Every day for the past two years, she has administered his dialysis and medications, bathed and clothed him, monitored his vitals, and prepared special meals for his kidney failure and diabetes. I am there to help translate for them, as they speak thickly accented and sometimes broken English. We go in, I explain the situation, my mother answers detailed questions about weight or the at-home interventions for the rash, and my father answers questions about itching or pain. We get admitted in 15 minutes, see a doctor in 30 minutes, see a dermatologist in another 30 minutes, and get discharged in another 30 minutes with prescriptions and a follow-up appointment scheduled. It is a relatively drama-free and quick appointment.

My mother and father are so relieved. The last time they had to go to the hospital for a rash, the visit took over 9 hours. They had waited for hours in the waiting room. The admitting nurse took a battery of tests and ordered blood work to be completed before a doctor saw him. When the doctor finally saw my father, he wanted to keep my father overnight for antibiotics to be administered by IV and to observe him. My mother explained how my father cannot sleep comfortably in hospital beds, how he cannot eat or hold down hospital food, and how his dialysis routine is specifically attuned to his weight and tolerance in the machines at home. She has to fight for hours and see three separate doctors before they agree it is best that he take oral antibiotics at home and return if the condition worsens.



"It's always so much easier when you come with us," my mother tells me. "They never believe me when I tell them what your father needs."

It is a common refrain and one of the reasons why I travel across the country at least once every month. I go to appointments with my parents, call the bank, arrange workers, and more. I do this, not because I know more about what needs to be done or because I am particularly savvy in any of these matters, but because I enjoy the privileges afforded to people who speak fluent and un-accented English. I am believed. I am assumed to know what I am talking about. I am perceived to be sharp-eyed and hard to swindle. All because of how I speak.

Privilege is an increasingly common term in social justice work. Coined by Peggy McIntosh, "Privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they've done or failed to do." There are two forms of privilege—unearned advantage (entitlements or things of value that should be granted everyone but is given to only some groups) and conferred dominance (bestowed control; granted authority; awarded power or domination). Privilege is systemic—media, education, laws, and other systems reinforce privilege in everyday and significant ways.

Privilege is also a commonly misunderstood term that causes many people to balk. Many are quick to say, "I work hard! My life has difficulties, too! I don't oppress anyone!" Privilege has connotations for many that they somehow created a rigged system and

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benefit from it, making good people with good intentions reject acknowledging it, owning it, or using it for good. I think about privilege and marginalization in a different way. They are things that are done TO us, individually, interpersonally, and institutionally because of a complex interaction of attitudes, history, and systems.

Some of our identities experience privileging. Growing up, we saw storybooks and picture books that reflected our culture, identities, and experiences. In schools, many of our teachers mirrored that aspect of our identity, and we were taught a curriculum that said people like us are the makers of history, writers of great literature, and the inventors of science and technology. On any given day, we could turn on TV or go to the movies and see people like us embodying a range of human experiences. We could go into any field, industry, government, entertainment, medicine, etc. and know that we would encounter many from that identity group and often in leadership positions. We know, that as a member of that group, hard

Continues on page 4

Continued from page 3

work and talent could get us anywhere, because society reinforces this idea every single day.

Some of our identities experience marginalization. Marginalization comes in two forms. One is invisibility—it's hard to find the storybooks, the teachers, the curricula, the media representation, or leadership role models that come from the same culture, identity, or experiences. When we do see examples of people like us, we often experience the second form of marginalization—stereotyping, where the portrayal is negative and monolithic and thus make us feel less than for being members of the group. We may see positive examples, but these seem like exceptions to the rule more than an everyday reminder that we are capable and worthy. Stereotyping then easily leads to prejudice, discrimination, oppression, and other

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hurdles that make it harder to be accepted, achieve success, or even survive an encounter with, say, a police officer.

I experience marginalization on a regular basis because of my race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, large size, and refusal to wear my wealth through my clothing and belongings. I am keenly aware that the Buddhism I was raised with is appropriated as fashion and décor in so many environments, even in “enlightened and liberal” ones. I know that I will go to the nonprofit board and donors event and be one of a handful of people of color in the room. I also know I will probably be asked where the coat check is or what's in the hors d'oeuvre, because I am assumed to be on the service staff. I rarely forget that I am a member of these groups or that stereotypes about these groups are pervasive.

I experience privileging on a regular basis because of my age, able body, my mental health, my language fluency, my socioeconomic class, and my citizenship status. However, I don't notice this privileging until I see that someone in a wheelchair cannot get into the room because the door is too narrow, someone has to make a choice between staying in school to improve his situation or working to pay his bills to avoid worsening his situation with debt or homelessness, or someone with extensive medical knowledge is dismissed because of her accent. Because society functions with these identities as the norm, I am a fish unaware of the water that feels so comfortable for me and so uncomfortable for others.

In the past, when I discovered my privilege and another's marginalization, I would slip into a myriad of responses. I would feel guilty that the world is unfair. I would feel embarrassed that I never thought about the struggles others face. I would feel defensive because none of these societal inequities are my fault, doing, or desire. I would feel insecure because I started to wonder how much of what I have is my own talent and efforts and what I have is due to a series of paths that were smoother for me. With my internalized dominance, I would feel resentful at equity efforts—getting annoyed that there were no parking spots open for me but a dozen spots were available for people with disabilities, wishing that the sign language interpreters would be placed in an area where they wouldn't distract me from fully enjoying the play, or rolling my eyes because the preflight safety announcement given in multiple languages took three times longer. And all of these feelings get in the way of my engaging in equity efforts.

These days, I try to re-script my reactions. Instead of feeling guilty, I remind myself the privileges I have are not bad and I want more people to have the same. Instead of feeling embarrassed, I think about how I can increase awareness in others who are also never taught about the struggles of others. Instead of feeling defensive, I acknowledge that injustices of the world I inherited are not my fault, but it is my responsibility to do something about it. Instead of feeling

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insecure, I seek reassurance in working towards a world where no one ever has to question why they are where they are. Instead of feeling resentful, I am glad to absorb a little annoyance, distraction, inconvenience, or even losses to gain the greater serenity living in a fairer world.

I also leverage my privilege to catalyze social justice in the world. I am not just translating and advocating for my parents—I am writing to hospital administrators about implicit and unconscious bias training, especially for their emergency room staff. My job takes me on the road over 150 days each year. I support airlines and hotels that have

Continues on page 21

Continued from page 19

of a finite universe, a universe where if one group, say women, gains opportunity another loses. There is considerable evidence¹ that a substantial portion of the male population feels that way. Herein lies the challenge. How can we help men see their privilege for what it is, encourage those with power and influence to pursue policies and practices that broaden opportunity for women, without making men feel that they are losing out in the process? We can start by building awareness among all our students. ●

1. Cassino, Dan. "Why More American Men Feel Discriminated Against." *Harvard Business Review*. September 29, 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/09/why-more-american-men-feel-discriminated-against>

Further Reading

Articles

Palmer II, Bedford. "Men's Intersectional Relationship to Male Privilege." *Psychology Today*. January 1, 2018. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/who-we-ought-be/201801/men-s-intersectional-relationship-male-privilege>

Deutsch, Barry. "The Male Privilege Checklist." <https://www.cpt.org/files/US%20-%20Male%20Privilege%20Checklist.pdf>

Rothman, Joshua. "The Origins of 'Privilege.'" *The New Yorker*. May 12, 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-origins-of-privilege>

Beinart, Peter. "The Nancy Pelosi Problem." *The Atlantic*. April 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/04/the-nancy-pelosi-problem/554048/>

Books

Required reading should be:

Banaji, Mahzarin R. and Anthony G. Greenwald. *Blindspot: The Hidden Biases of Good People*. Delacorte Press, 2013.

Related reading:

Steele, Claude M. *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do* (Issues of Our Time). W.W. Norton & Co., 2011.

Thought-provoking:

Beard, Mary. *Women in Power: A Manifesto*. Liveright, 2017.

Susanna A. Jones currently serves as Head of School for the Holton-Arms School, a girls' day school for grades 3-12 in Bethesda, MD. She is a graduate of Phillips Academy in Andover and Princeton University, and earned her M.A. and M. Phil. in history from Columbia University.

Continued from page 5

more accessibility features and encourage other business travelers to support them, and when I encounter problems, I write to managers and corporate headquarters about what I saw and why I won't be choosing them until I see changes. Even though I work in an independent school and don't have children, I will always vote for taxing wealthier folks like myself to increase public school funding so that ALL families and ALL children can have access to education and opportunities. I know that if we all leverage our privileges, an equitable world will materialize much faster.

I invite readers to think about their own unique intersection of identities. Which identities experience marginalization, and how can you reject societal messages that say you are not enough and fight to remove the barriers to your opportunities

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and success? Which identities experience privileging, and how can you overcome paralyzing feelings and fight to make the world a more just place you can believe in? Everyone has a place in social justice work, we all have work to do, and a just world liberates us all. I hope you will join me in this journey. ●

Rosetta Lee is a teacher and a professional outreach specialist for Seattle Girls' School in Seattle, Washington. As an outreach specialist, she delivers trainings for schools and non-profits covering a variety of diversity and inclusion topics, such as prejudice reduction and coalition building, gender and sexuality diversity, cross cultural communication, and more. She can be reached at rllee@seattlegirlsschool.org.

Upcoming CSEE Events with Rosetta Lee

Inclusion in the Early Years
St. Louis • November 7, 2018

Othering and Belonging in Schools
New Orleans • March 14-15, 2019

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